

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter is meant to provide the Children's Service Worker with information on the learning and teaching process.

"It is impossible to teach anyone anything; rather, what the teacher can do is set up the conditions in which a person can learn." Carl Rogers

Introduction

According to the classic definition of "learning," learning has taken place if a measurable change in behavior occurs. Learning - reflected in altered behavior - is a major goal of Family-Centered Services. In-home and community interventions are designed to produce changes in behavior which will achieve the goals of the family and of the community representatives who may be participating in defining the problem. Many of the activities of Children's Service Workers aim to facilitate learning-induced behavior change.

The Learning Process

By considering the process of learning more carefully, we can find many answers to the question, "How do I help people change?" Perhaps Mary Ann Fahl best describes its importance in teaching coping skills to parents and children: "the more we ... can know about the nature of the learning process and about how each person or client learns, the more refined will be the treatment process for a family."

The implications of this statement extend to many aspects of Family-Centered Service. Listed here are the primary areas in which Children's Service Workers teach:

- Home management and life skills;
- Communication and relationships skills;
- Parenting and child management;
- Assertiveness and self-advocacy;
- Problem solving;
- Using community resources; and
- Constructive, productive coping.

Learning is naturally one of the most pleasant and rewarding human activities, provided that it occurs in an atmosphere of trust and freedom. However, many client family

members (adults and children alike) are the victims of years of punishing experiences in formal school settings, of negative social and familial circumstances, or of others trying to force them to change. It is the practitioner's responsibility to establish relationships and circumstances in which learning and change can become pleasant and reinforcing.

Adult Learning Styles

We next need to be aware of our own learning styles so that we can best first understand how we learn and then predict how our clients learn and see how we will relate to our development of a relationship. Adults tend to favor one of four main learning styles:

- Concrete Experience - Use specific experience examples, involvement, discussion. Many clients learn best in this style. Their own current experiences serve as the learning examples. Often the particular abusing incident may be too emotionally charged, so some other incident they bring up in discussion can serve as the situation from which to learn.
- Reflective Observation - Try to get client to impartially observe specific situation of others, then generalize self to the situation.
- Abstract Conceptualization - Have client fantasize how they would use authority and direction in an impersonal situation, then theorize how this could be applied. This done, move to active experimentation or concrete experience.
- Active Experimentation - Use projects, homework, discussion.

Determine which style suits your client best by experimenting with each style early in the treatment, or by talking with persons who know the client well.

Applying Sound Teaching Principles in the Home

A number of basic teaching principles are valid for work with clients of all ages:

- Begin by determining what the individual already knows, as well as what he or she wishes to learn. Devise methods that discover, recognize, reinforce and build on what the person already has learned. It is demeaning to the learner and potentially damaging to the Children's Service Worker/learner relationship to presume to teach someone what they already know;
- Recognize the capacities of family members, as well as the things which may hinder their learning. Become aware of the tremendous variations in the ways people learn. Try to identify each client's learning style (see "Learning

Styles," above). When interventions are chosen, attempt to adapt techniques to each client's learning style;

- Plan and structure teaching to ensure early experiences of success. Structure teaching in small, sequential steps to avoid frustration and discouragement;
- Plan for strong reinforcement as both short-term and long-term goals are achieved. Find out what reinforces the learner; remember that reinforcement can be just as important to adults as to children;
- Relationship is a powerful catalyst to learning, and the desire to please is an excellent motivator. Believe in the family's capacity to cope, and they may be able to begin believing in themselves;
- Show that learning is pleasant. The chance to teach you something that they do well can build clients' self-esteem. Perhaps the client could teach the worker to play pool or a card game, how to fix a favorite food, or a craft or skill.

As Children's Service Workers and families assess goals and priorities, recognizing the hierarchy of needs will help workers to understand their clients' natural agenda. The following guidelines are presented to assist in teaching information related to specific problems that are often encountered by families.

Housing

Finding adequate housing for client families can be a virtually impossible task. The Children's Service Worker may want to first determine if the family knows how to use the classified section of the newspaper and how to make the necessary contacts to locate housing. Arranging telephone and transportation services may assist in these efforts.

Children's Service Workers should become familiar with both official and unofficial channels for information about available housing in their communities. Workers and families need to be familiar with public housing programs and special programs for limited-income families.

Regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) establish federal preferences for families most in need of housing assistance through Public Housing and Section 8 Housing programs. Applicants who qualify for any of these preferences will receive housing assistance before other applicants, regardless of local preferences and priorities or their position on waiting lists which often accompany these programs. The HUD regulations establish federal preferences for three groups:

- Families who have been involuntarily displaced from their homes;

- Families living in substandard housing; and
- Families paying more than 50% of family income for rent.

The regulations also allow some local discretion in setting up tenant selection systems to administer the federal preferences. Public housing authorities may allocate up to 10% of their annual housing assistance awards to families who do not qualify for the three categories of federal preference. This provision permits public housing authorities to implement their own local preferences and priorities, such as a special priority being established for families who have children at risk of being placed in foster care, or whose children remain in foster care, because of the lack of adequate housing.

It may be helpful if Children's Service Workers have the knowledge and skills to help the family make household repairs and improvements. This can help the worker and family join together in the relationship building process.

Moving to new housing or completing a home improvement or decorating project may be important therapeutic activities, giving hope and a sense of accomplishment, developing the Children's Service Worker's relationship with the family, raising their self-esteem and serving as a "proving ground" for skills learned in family counseling, such as problem solving and communication.

Budgeting and Debt Management

Families who are referred for services may be seriously in debt or behind in meeting their financial obligations. It is crucial to address financial problems early in the treatment process. Pressure from creditors can be a serious source of stress, and the family may be unable to focus on other problems until this is resolved. Getting this area under control can facilitate hope and promote a good worker/client relationship. Some causes of financial problems will be obvious or readily shared. The Children's Service Worker should also be alert to hidden causes, but should avoid threatening questions during the early stages of building a relationship with the family. Some common causes for financial problems are:

- Difficulty with basic math (perhaps an inexpensive calculator is needed);
- Problems with alcohol, drugs, or gambling;
- Lack of experience in managing money;
- Difficulty in talking about money with a spouse or lack of family cooperation on money matters. Perhaps finances have become the battleground for family members;

- An inability to say "no" to salespeople, children or friends;
- An inability to face up to the reality of changes in income or expenses.

Once a family has indicated that they want help with financial matters, the Children's Service Worker should organize help in the following manner:

- Ask the client to collect all outstanding bills, including all money owed and all monthly bills.
- Provide forms for listing income and bills and determine the family's total monthly income and the total amount of money they owe. If possible, ask the client to do the writing and figuring from the beginning, with the Children's Service Worker available only as a consultant. Avoid embarrassing the client. It is better to offer assistance if the tasks of writing or figuring seem threatening to the client;
- Jointly determine the family's minimum monthly expenses;
- Work with the family to plan a proposed payment schedule;
- Visit creditors, if appropriate, with the client to negotiate payment schedules. It may be helpful for the Children's Service Worker to phone the credit manager in advance to lay the groundwork for a successful interview;
- Help the family arrange a monthly plan for paying bills and recording expenses and payments. Families may devise a variety of budgeting systems, which may include using money orders, joint checking accounts, envelopes for each category of expenses and a system for organizing and filing bills and receipts;
- Arrange for participation and monitoring appropriate to the causes of the client's financial difficulties;
- Gradually withdraw worker participation as new habits are learned;

For long-range resolution of financial problems, Children's Service Workers will need to determine if the problems are the result of a simple lack of skills or symptoms of problems in the family system or the family's interaction with other systems. Often financial problems result from a combination of such factors.

Home Management

Raising the level of home management and child care skills is often a key component of service programs designed to prevent out-of-home placement of children at risk. Determining whether a given family's home and habits are "adequate" is always a tenuous task for the child's Children's Service Worker. A family-centered approach is ideal both for assessment and for providing services to improve the home environment. Working within the home and family system, the worker is able to distinguish conditions that merely reflect variations in personal values and life-styles from those that are detrimental to the children's well-being.

Help parents meet their own basic needs first. Many parents need both permission to and instruction in how to nurture and care for themselves. Getting a parent to feel better, emotionally and physically, may be the single most important step toward improving his or her functioning.

1. Include all family members in planning and programming for home management goals. It is frequently a mistake to work only with mothers. A key advantage to family-centered programs is that they provide an opportunity to involve the entire family in the program.
 - Include men as part of the in-home service team as role models and to emphasize the importance of the men in the family system, if applicable.
 - Be sensitive to the family's values. For instance, housework may be out of the question for some men, but they might be comfortable learning to enjoy activities with their children in order to give the mothers a break, or teaching or supervising children in putting away toys or picking up trash in the yard.
 - Remember that working on life skills is an excellent way for the entire family to practice interpersonal skills learned in the counseling relationship, such as conflict resolution, new communication patterns, use of praise and positive reinforcement.
 - Teach normal child development and reasonable expectations of children at all ages.
 - Teach parents how to teach their children how to perform multi-step tasks, such as doing the dishes or cleaning their room.
 - Organize and initiate an appropriate division of labor by using chore charts.

- Negotiate in what ways other adult members of the household are willing and able to assist. Consider gaining consistency by using contracts. Establish what each person can be counted on to do.
- 2. Decide on home management standards which are essential to the well-being of children and parents. Distinguish those from standards which merely reflect the helpers' own values. Insight into culturally determined values and activities is essential.
- 3. Be sure that parents understand the social and health implications of household neglect. Families may have become accustomed to home management situations without realizing the medical and social ramifications. For instance, a parent who rarely leaves their apartment may become accustomed to the odor of dogs which pervades the household and her children's clothing. Because of this they may not realize that the odor is causing the children to be treated cruelly at school.

Effectively addressing these situations will require the Children's Service Worker to develop a good relationship with the parent and gently, but accurately, describe his/her own responses to the dogs' odors. By being helped to a real understanding of the problem, the parent may then follow through by sanitizing the apartment and eliminating the odor.

- 4. Teach the basic skills of how to establish priorities among tasks and how to schedule realistically in relation to available time. These skills are usually developed in childhood through close contact with an adult model. They can be dramatically affected by individual differences in the perception of time. These are relatively complex skills, but they can be taught by carefully applying the teaching principles introduced in this chapter.
- 5. Develop realistic expectations. Expect only limited progress if a family has been severely damaged by years of deprivation and isolation. The family may feel hopeless about the possibility of change. If depression or anxiety prevents a parent from beginning home management tasks, the Children's Service Worker may work with her or him simply as a catalyst to get an activity started. Constructive activity may in turn alleviate depression and anxiety.
- 6. Recognize and build on strengths. Do this in an organized, purposeful manner. Let the family know you are aware of their strengths. Often the strengths of a family unit will be obvious to anyone who spends time with them in their home. In other instances, skill, patience and time will be needed to draw them out.

7. Time the interventions at an appropriate pace. Timing is always a critical factor in motivating and involving family members. Strive for balance between stagnation and pushing the family too fast. For many families there seems to be a limit to the degree of growth and change that can occur in a given time.
8. Provide concrete resources when necessary. If discretionary funds are available, they can be used for such items as basic cleaning supplies, reinforcers for behavior modification programs, school supplies or materials for special school projects, occasional recreation opportunities, and birthday or other remembrances or celebrations. Some agencies maintain a storehouse of furniture, appliances, clothing and toys. By soliciting contributions from both organizations and individuals, a steady supply of usable items may be obtained. Some items may be obtainable through crisis intervention funds.

Related Subject: Section 3, Chapter 5, Attachment C, Crisis Intervention Funds.

9. Carry out life skills assistance within the context of the comprehensive family service plan. Life skills problems, such as how a family maintains its living space, often involve much more than issues of orderliness or sanitation. For example, accumulated debris is often a part of the family's history and identity, and should be disposed of only with their permission. Children's Service Workers may help sort and point out choices/alternatives, and facilitate decisions, but the ultimate choices should be the family's. This process may take days or even weeks, but the time is well spent if the family is gaining maturity and self-respect and their relationship with the worker is preserved.

Employment and Training

Because Children's Service Workers serve entire families, locating and maintaining satisfactory employment is frequently a service goal for at least one member of the family. For individuals who have never worked outside the home or who have had negative work experiences, this may require a great deal of the worker's effort.

Children's Service Workers should be familiar with all the career counseling, education, training and employment resources available to their families. Explore special programs for women, for those seeking a high school diploma, for veterans and for mothers on AFDC. Be sure you are aware of the broadest definitions of those entitled to vocational rehabilitation or other training programs.

Testing, training and job hunting all involve evaluation and can be threatening to clients. Be creative in helping them overcome their fears. Arrange for them to take a lot of tests,

get copies to practice at home, or take tests with clients. Consider taking them to meet counselors or evaluators ahead of time to establish relationship and gain familiarity with the testing setting and procedures.

When you have a realistic idea of a client's employment potential, help the client meet people who are doing that kind of work. Visit job sites and training programs. Both employers and instructors are often willing to describe their programs enthusiastically and to answer questions.

Once clients are in career programs, Children's Service Workers should maintain contact with program personnel and with the client. Many potentially successful programs are derailed merely because no one was available at a crucial time to help with transportation, to trouble-shoot, to negotiate misunderstandings, or to provide support and reassurance during a difficult moment.

When a client wishes to look for a job, it may be necessary to teach the skills involved in job hunting, completing job applications, and interviewing successfully. The principles and techniques discussed in this chapter again are applicable. When appropriate, Children's Service Workers may accompany clients to job interviews and make themselves known to employers. Prospective employers are often willing to hire young, inexperienced people when they know a worker is available to provide support.

Health and Nutrition

Basic health care and proper diets are essential to healthy families. These basic needs will require the involvement of the Children's Service Workers before other needs are addressed.

Nutrition: Children's Service Workers will need skills and techniques to help families adapt their meals to meet basic daily nutritional requirements on limited budgets. Families will be more motivated to work for a balanced diet if they realize that their physical appearance and physical and emotional energy depend upon what they eat. Family, cultural and religious dietary customs and personal preferences should be taken into account in planning menus. Providing the family with lists based on the four basic food groups will help them plan nutritionally balanced meals. Everyone needs the same basic nutrients, but these can be supplied in many ways. Attempts to help families balance their dietary intake will be more successful if workers respect and use the variety of cultural and ethnic customs.

Health and Dental Care: Children's Service Workers should be familiar with all the medical and dental services available to families in their community. Many families need help in learning to negotiate the health care system. Clinics are sometimes difficult to find, and facilities are often large and impersonal. Treatment instructions may be confusing or misunderstood, and patients often lack the assertiveness to get their questions answered or their concerns heard.

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Rest, Relaxation, and Exercise: The importance of physical well-being to emotional health and energy cannot be overemphasized. Children's Service Workers often establish exercise or jogging regimens with depressed or anxious parents as key elements in their overall treatment plan. The ability to structure simple relaxation sessions is also a valuable skill.

Source: This chapter was adapted from Placement Prevention and Family Reunification: A Handbook for the Family-Centered Service Practitioner, authored by June C. Lloyd and Marvin E. Bryce with assistance from LaVonne Schulze, published by The National Resource Center on Family Based Services, Revised 1984, Chapter 9.

Suggestions on Health and Nutrition are adapted from Faye Strayer, Homemaker-Home Health Aid Manual (Iowa City: The University of Iowa, 1976). It was also included in Section 7, Chapter 6 of this handbook.

MEMORANDA HISTORY: